

Jonah & the Day of Mourning

Jonah 3:1-5,10

The book of Jonah is really interesting because there is very little known about it. We don't know anything about who wrote it or when it was written. There are good arguments from within the text to date it over seven centuries and even, from a literary point of view, no consensus as to the genre. About the only thing that biblical scholars do agree on is that it's not a history detailing actual events and most likely it is a novel of some description. The best indication for how to understand Jonah is that, as I mentioned earlier, it is traditionally read on Yom Kippur.

We heard earlier [a song](#) that tells the story of Jonah, which of course is already an interpretation of the book. What did you hear in that song that made connections for you between Jonah and the Day of Atonement?

For me, there's a bit in the last verse of the song that really creates that connection:

And here's the message we're sent
it's more than how we repent
we can change, we can grow
we can be more than we know.

In short, our mistakes – individually or collectively – do not define us. We always have the opportunity to grow and learn, and we always have the chance to change our ways.

I thought this made very good timing for Jonah to appear in the lectionary as we commemorate the Day of Mourning. Nineveh was a dominant power in its world. Like the British Empire many years later, it conquered vast swathes of territory for its own benefit. In conquering that territory, it imposed its culture and beliefs on the various lands and forcibly displaced people in order to better control them. Admittedly, this was the standard operating procedure of Empires right up to the middle of the last century.

It must have been frightening for Jonah to go and bring a message to the people on Nineveh, and his escape in the opposite direction is hardly surprising. There really is not a modern equivalent to this for us as Westerners – perhaps the best would be bringing a prophetic message of destruction to Putin does not really illustrate the point. But for the First Nations peoples of our land, this has been their experience every time they seek to have their voice heard and to bring us to repentance for the actions of our ancestors and the ongoing benefit we have because of their historic dislocation.

I can quite understand how Jonah summarised his message: Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown! It is all judgement and no indication of grace. I can understand the victims of an all-powerful Empire wanting to systematically strip away hope from that Empire that had abused them and their families. It is a natural response and, may I add, we have been recipients of grace from Congress in their seeking to walk with us rather than judge us and go their own way.

Well, Jonah might have missed out on communicating God's grace, and I should give him the benefit of the doubt as the story is ambiguous as to what God commands him to say. However, despite this, despite worshiping different gods, the people of Nineveh hear the message of Jonah and repent with all sincerity.

I suspect the use of this book for Yom Kippur is as a reminder that no one is beyond the grace of God and that includes the Ninevites; that includes us with all our culture's historic messes that we have made in the lives of other people, especially the First Nations of our land.

If we were to continue reading Jonah, we would hear of his anger that God forgave the Ninevites – that was his reason for going to Spain; he knew God would forgive them if they repented and thought he would be left with mud on his face. Through the growth and withering of a bush that briefly gave Jonah shade, God calls out Jonah's anger at the grace shown to the Ninevites. The story ends with God saying:

You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labour and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left and also many animals?

The Ninevites were not personally responsible for what happened to the others in the Empire, but they all benefited from it. In many ways we are like the Ninevites, not personally responsible, but we benefit.

As you reflect on this story, and the grace already shown by Congress to those of us who are second and subsequent peoples of this land, how does that change your relationship with other people, with our land, and with God?